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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Concord Coach

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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Concord Coach

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For years I worked with **John Secor**, who in 1971 began to sell books from his car to libraries around New England on behalf of the company he founded in Contoocook, New Hampshire and called **Yankee Book Peddler**. At some point during the 1990s, when the company, by then renamed **YBP**, counted among its customers many of the greatest academic libraries around the country and the world, he had begun to talk about the **Concord Coach**. "If we don't change," he would say, "we'll go the way of the **Concord Coach**."

The **Concord Coach** was a stagecoach made in nearby Concord, New Hampshire. In the mid-nineteenth century the **Concord Coach**, like **YBP**, had customers around the country and the world. **Wells Fargo** was the most famous. The **Concord Coach** was famous then, too. Today it is merely a local icon. The New Hampshire Historical Society, located in Concord, and the city's newspaper, the *Concord Monitor*, both exhibit bright red **Concord Coaches** in their buildings. The city's official seal features the **Concord Coach**. Everyone in the area knows about the **Concord Coach**.

Of course the **Concord Coach** became a museum piece because cars, buses, and trucks put stagecoaches out of business. **John Secor's** point was that the same thing could happen to a complacent bookseller. "What business are we in?" he'd ask, echoing the business books and magazines of the day. The people who made the **Concord Coach** thought they were in the stagecoach business. But in the 1990s it was easy to see, and to say, that they were really in the transportation business. Maybe **YBP**, likewise, wasn't really in the book business.

This was in the days when the first wave of dot.coms made it easy to think that the world had changed overnight. **NetLibrary** was flush with startup cash. Hype over eBooks was peaking. Before long, print books were sure to go the way those brick-and-mortar stores were about to go. The same way the stagecoaches went.

The world did change and so did the book business, but as usual not in ways easy to imagine then. Library bookselling became enveloped in technical services. Much of the business was conducted over something called the World Wide Web. But — surprise — print books held their own. Instead it was eBooks, for a time, that seemed in danger of becoming museum pieces.

Maybe bookselling and stagecoach-making didn't turn out to be the same, but **John Secor's** parable was still a good one. Thanks to continued vital signs on the part of print books, we booksellers are not quite history. But who doesn't need a reminder now and then that the world is going to change on you? And why *didn't* they realize that at the **Concord Coach**? I wanted to find out, and so did a little reading at **Concord Public Library**.

Lewis Downing was a Concord wagonmaker who set up in business in 1813.

He progressed to making stagecoaches and in 1826 formed a partnership with **J. Stephens Abbot**, of Salem, Massachusetts. Their **Abbot-Downing Company** became widely known for the manufacture of fine stagecoaches of a distinctive flat-top, round-bottom shape that became a standard, and a unique suspension system that led **Mark Twain** to remark that the **Concord Coach** was like "an imposing cradle on wheels."

In the Concord area there's a well-known print showing a locomotive pulling a long train of flatcars, a brand new **Concord Coach** fastened to each of the cars. The train was headed to the west, where stagecoaches made by **Abbot-Downing** earned their place as a symbol of the country's expansion to the Pacific. By the 1850s, **Concord Coaches** had been sold in nearly every state in the Union. And beyond, once **Abbot-Downing** developed a market in South America.

By the 1890s, business had spread to Australia, where the company had agents in Melbourne and Sydney. The payroll in Concord totaled some 250 employees. Even today, that would place a company among the city's business leaders. A repair plant in New York employed 40 beyond that, and in Vermont a lumbering division accounted for 15 more. The advent of one technological and economic cataclysm, brought on by the railroad, only strengthened **Abbot-Downing**. The company built vehicles for the short-haul ride to a hotel or an inn that would complete a passenger's long-haul trip on the train. Business flourished.

And, the end was at hand. Automobiles were being manufactured in the United States by the 1890s. In 1899, there were 30 automakers in this country. Ten years later there were 485. One was Detroit's **Ford Motor Company**, whose Model T came out in 1908. The eBook industry has not as yet found its **Henry Ford**, but if you are a bookseller in the vicinity of Concord, New Hampshire

in 2006, it is hard not to think of the **Abbot-Downing Company** a century ago, at the height of success, and on the cusp of irrelevance.

John Secor's parable didn't have everything quite right, though. **Abbot-Downing** knew all along that they were in the transportation business. In addition to the famous stagecoaches, over the years **Abbot-Downing** made special vehicles for bakers, brewers, butter dealers, feed dealers, furniture makers, ice dealers, and grocers. Horse-drawn streetcars were another line. In 1916, the company even began to custom-build motor trucks and by 1919, attempted to mass-produce them.

By then, however, as is clear now and must have been clear to some people at the time, it was too late for **Abbot-Downing**. The motor truck venture failed and the company was dissolved in 1925.

Should **Abbot-Downing**, aware as they were that they were in the transportation business, have started to make cars and trucks in the 1890s, as the parable would teach? Could placid Concord, New Hampshire have rivaled Detroit? Or, instead, would **Abbot-Downing** have been just one of the 480 or so defunct U.S.

continued on page 93



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Back Talk from page 94

5. We can offer little or no service from 10 PM to 8AM (High percent of school work is done long after we close our doors and we are embracing 24/7 in the information commons context.)
6. MARC cataloging is worth the cost (Only if it is the cost of copy cataloging)
7. Readers need to have smart people select materials for them (my own studies have shown that e-books selected by users always out circulate expert-selected e-books and Google seems to satisfy most people within the first two screens most of the time.)
8. Satisfying most users is recognized as good enough (Begrudgingly accepted, but this is why huge libraries are revered so much and why Google is appreciated so easily.)

9. Silence is golden in a library (Doesn't seem important to most undergraduates most of the time.)
10. Food and libraries don't mix (My librarians still feel this way but students clearly don't.)

I could go on and on, but you get the idea. And of course we are not the only ones on our campuses reflecting on all of this.

Now I realize that lots of librarians have been going down this doom and gloom trail for a long time. In my own case I still continue to take solace and encouragement from the failure of the long expected paperless office; the continued growth of publishing and bookstores; the ongoing complaints and demands for longer library hours; the number one complaint at my campus that we lack books in the reader's field even though we buy tens and tens of thousands of them annually; the emails from students expressing thanks for the help they received last Tuesday night at 8:00 from the lady with white hair; the high number of students filling our 24/7 Student Study Centre; the pleasure of key-word searching

across human generated LC subject headings and cataloging notes; continued demand for browsing in collections selected by experts; continued high ratings from students who don't mind unmercifully flaying all the other bureaucratic agencies on campus; the complaints from students when it gets too noisy or when people talk on their mobiles (cell phones); and — well I have to admit I don't hear a hue and cry from users to get rid of the food.

So, in our life of constant change there continues to be continuities as well. Let me end with a quote taken from a T-shirt I bought this summer at the **Vancouver Public Library**: "I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library." **Jorge Luis Borges**. Let's hope he is right. 🐼

I Hear the Train A Comin' from page 92

How do you see Blackboard services intersecting with institutional repositories and peer reviewed journals?

Clearly there are intriguing opportunities — although progress has been slow. There is intriguing cross over. Institutional repositories and learning object repositories share many of the same issues: metadata tagging systems that will scale, encouraging consistent deposits and updates, archiving.

On the other hand, we, the e-learning community and the scholarly community, speak different languages. At **Blackboard** we are deeply interested in research and scholarship but, day in and day out, we and our customers are focused on teaching and learning. We know that the scholars and librarians building institutional repositories are deeply committed to students. On the other hand, day in and day out they tend to put a stronger focus on research.

When these two communities converge, something totally transformative will occur in education. I think that's what **Cliff Lynch** of **CNI** is trying to point to in his recent writings and presentations.

How will the merger of Blackboard and WebCT change the way in which the academy uses Course Management Software?

The most exciting opportunity initially is for schools that form natural communities to continue and extend their collaboration, even though some may have been using the **Blackboard CMS** and others **WebCT**.

The merger also allows us as a company to bring together more of the best minds in e-learning to drive our understanding and our vision of where our products and services need to go next. 🐼

Issues in Vendor/Library ... from page 91

automobile manufacturers that you've never heard of?

That, most likely. In the early automobile business, success called for more than vision. After all, 485 companies had some measure of that. It also took access to capital, to labor, to markets, to raw materials. And, it took the very smartest people. And some luck, and some ruthlessness, and not just vision, but a vision-ary to lead the company.

Abbot-Downing was more than a hapless stagecoach-maker that stood still while the world changed. They were a big success. The company sold its goods around the country and the world. **Abbot-Downing** had enough vision to stay in business for over one hundred years. How many companies of any era have lasted as long as that?

What's the lesson in this? One is that parables leave out much of the story. Life is usually more complex. Another is that operating a successful business is not easy. You need vision, but you need more than that. Run a company for a hundred years, and still, you don't have it made. (As today, even the **Ford Motor Company** is discovering.) And a third is that if you do make the right choices, you can prosper for a long time. As **Abbot-Downing** proved.

Print books, to most of us in the business, do not seem quite ready to succumb to eBooks the way the stagecoach did to motorized transportation. The two will co-exist for a long time, as stagecoaches and railroads did. There, in fact, might be a better parallel for today's book vendor. Railroads and railroad passengers needed **Abbot-Downing's** stagecoaches. Publishers of

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And for the book vendor, who stands squarely in the middle of all this today, how to build a solution as elegant and as perfect as the **Concord Coach** was for most of a century? 🐼